

[The Bennett Family]

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A Shrimper's Family

28 Clark Street

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St. Augustine, Florida

THE BENNETT FAMILY

In West Augustine, that part of the town lying west of the San Sebastian River, there is a small section called "Wildwood Park" composed mainly of small homes, [were?] a majority of the inhabitants are people connected with the fishing industry, and most of them Portuguese or Italians who speak very little or no English.

The small shops and eating places along the main highway, West King Street, attract many of the fishermen, and often groups of men congregate in front of these places of business, dark, swarthy looking men, jabbering away in their native tongue, probably discussing the happenings of the day.

To reach West Augustine, one crosses the San Sebastian Bridge, and at this time the tide was high, the surface of the water so blue and smooth that the vari-colored advertising posters along the west bank of the river were clearly reflected on the still water.

On the south side of the bridge the banks of the river are lined with small docks, shabby looking peaking houses and the many shrimp beats that have their headquarters here; (Many tourists visit this section.) Some of the boats may be painted in gay colors, while

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others may be drab and shabby. Odd and fanciful names painted on the stern, the hugh nets [festooned?] out to dry against the background of [nasts?], marsh and blue skies, all a [prossie?] scene to these fishermen, but one of interest to the passer-by, and an enchanting one to the many artists who frequent the this locality and transfer these colorful settings on canvas. 2 I almost forgot that my objective was an interview, and not merely a jaunt to enjoy scenery, so hurried on my way, and a little further on met a mutual acquaintance who offered to introduce me to one of her neighbors[.?] Mrs. Bennett, who, upon reaching the house, we found on her front porch sewing.

Mrs. Bennett cordially invited me to sit down, while she continued busily featherstitching the white collar and cuffs on a tiny dress of red and white check dimity that she told me was for a little girl living across the street, a birthday gift.

The Bennett family occupy this white, newly painted, cottage. A cement walk leads from the paved street to the wide steps: the grassed yard clean, and at one side near a dividing fence were numerous painted boxes containing flowering plants.

The home, consisting of five rooms and bath, is well and comfortably furnished, showing evidence of good judgment in the selection and arrangement.

I asked Mrs. Bennett if they owned their home, but she replied, "No, we have rented this house for seven years. We have just not reached the stage where we felt we could buy; My husband worked for years with his brother, but is now buying a boat of his own and has it almost paid for. We have held off, too, until something is done about the harbour and channel, you knew this is something that is badly needed for at times when the weather is rough, the channel and sand bars shift and makes crossing the bar very dangerous. Very strong [effects?] are being made by local officials and shrimp dealers to have a channel out 3 through the south point of North Beach, and if that goes through, and the boat paid for, why then I am sure we will buy a home.

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Mr. Bennett, now thirty-nine years of age, was born in Fernandina, Florida, and spent his boyhood there. He enlisted in the Navy, and at the expiration of a three year enlistment, returned to his home and entered the fishing industry, coming to St. Augustine in 1927.

Mr. Bennett is now fishing out of Fernandina, supplying shrimp to the Brooks Canning Co. located there, and at home with his family only every two weeks.

"You know my husband is called a lucky fisherman," Mrs. Bennett said, "But it is not so much luck as it the understanding of the fishing area, watching closely the migration, and even the speed of the shrimp, this generally resulting during the height of the season in local waters, of an average catch of from two-thousand to twenty-five hundred pounds weekly. At this season of the year around here the shrimp are getting scarce."

About this point in the conversation, the baby girl, just waking from her mid-morning nap, called to her mother, then joined us out on the front porch. Matilda will be two years old in July: grey eyed, very light brown curly hair, and dressed in clean blue checked play dress, she made a very attractive picture as she played in the sunshine. 4 Commenting on the child's lovely soft hair and her healthy appearance, her mother said "Yes, she is a healthy baby, and she never been sick except once, when she had a slight temperature while cutting teeth: But, she laughingly said, "You should have seen her hair when she was a little baby, it grew every way except the right one, and even the small boy, much distressed, asked in his prayers "Please, God, do something about Matilda's hair." (Evidently his prayers had been answered satisfactorily) and the constant care given had resulted in its present fine texture and condition.

Asking Mrs. Bennett about her early life, she said, "I am now twenty-eight years old and I was born at Mayport and lived there until my marriage. My father was one of the [Andron?] family that for several generations have made Mayport their home. My mother died while I was in school, you know they have only grade school there, so I just completed the eighth grade. My father wanted me to continue school, but the nearest high school was

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in Jacksonville, so at sixteen I married. I have two older children, a girl of eleven, and a boy just seven, and this one, the baby. The two older children attend the Catholic Parish School, and as it is such a long walk from home, they take their lunch with them. We do want the children to have at least, a high school education, it will mean so much to them as they grow older, and we want to give them all the advantages our income will permit, and we hope they will “[Do?] something” when they grow up.”

Mrs. Bennett is a member of the Catholic Church, and her husband is a Baptist, but his work does not permit his attending church very regularly, and on the Sundays that he is home there are always things to be done and he likes to spend all the time possible with the family, he is devoted to the children, and they think there is no one like daddy.

In tones of voice expressing pride and affection, she discussed the care of children. “Isn't it fascinating,” Mrs. Bennett said, “Watching children's growth, their changing moods and interests, there is always something new and different. Their growing needs are sometimes a problem, but I like to sew, and I do the laundry myself, so they are kept clean and look nice when they go to school and Church. And, too, I see that that they have the proper food for growing children, plenty of vegetables are included in their meals.”

“About politics- Democrats, of course, but we don't take such a very active part. We are interested in the local government, and, naturally, concerned in the national government, especially as it relates to employment, and to harbor improvements or anything that will affect the shrimping and fishing industry, for this means so much to the town, and also to other towns on the [coast?] where the boats dock and have their headquarters at certain season, shifting with the migration of the fish and shrimp. 6 Having visited and spent several months at the little seaport town of Mayport about thirty-six years ago, and having known several Andreu's and roomed at the home of one branch of the family, I asked about her own family and where they lived. “Do you remember the little Catholic Church” Mrs. Bennett asked, well, we lived right near the church, and it was at my uncle's that you roomed, on the river front, near the old East Coast dock.” “Do tell me, please, I asked,

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about Mrs. McCormick, who used to be postmistress there so many years ago. We all liked her so much and the railroad crowd used to gather in the store at night, discussing all sorts of subjects, from the size of fish caught that day, up to important events of the times.” “Why, do you know, that Mrs. McCormack McCormick is still living at Mayport and still in charge of the postoffice: she is getting old now and has some on to help her, but she will probably be right there as long as she lives, and just as well liked as when you knew her, long before I was born” was Mrs. Bennett's reply.

Judging from Mrs. Bennett's conversation, one would readily credit her with having more than a grade school education, and apparently her ambition, and that of her husband, is to provide a comfortable home for the family, and a suitable education for the children.

Mrs. Bennett, is a woman of small statue, dark brown hair and eyes, nice features, and a very cheerful manner, and although she is a small woman, [?] she impresses one as having strength and competence.

As I was leaving, Mrs. Bennett said “You don't know how nice it is to talk with someone who knew my people, do com again.